

Masthead Logo

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# Amulets

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## AMULETS

Riddled by seaworms, the figurehead's blind  
unsurprised eyes gaze past a tattooed sailor's  
hide, brindled with waves & fish, spreadeagled  
on the wall, this coastal town museum. Clumsy  
dioramas, ivory birdcages, the instruments of

celestial navigation. Down gallery,  
in her battered leather jacket, I watch Emily  
& her daughter kneel to spy through miniature  
isinglass windows. An immense dollhouse:  
each parlor, bedroom & hallway opening to

surprise, a mansion of possibility, each  
salver & bannister burnished to perfection.  
The latest t-cell count report crumpled  
in her pocket, she points to a tiny  
muslin gown draping a chair as if just shrugged

from someone's shoulders freshly risen from  
sleep's farthest shore, the shapes that flit  
there—a man scarified with tidal waves  
& floral demons, a harpy carved to plunge  
like a diving horse from the ship's prow

through an ocean of ice. I need some amulet,  
those charms we made as girls of locks  
scissored from each other's hair  
because mere faith did not seem harbor enough  
in a world of brute possibility.

Or these pendants & bracelets woven entirely  
of human hair. Storms of it—chestnut,  
auburn, eternally growing, blue-sheened black,  
ashen blonde pulled from brushes, combs, soaked  
& dried, combed & knotted, shellacked

with yellow sealing wax. Talismans.  
The ill-typed card of explanation warps  
through the glass case, currents & bubbles  
rippling the whirr of voices diminuendoed  
when I close my eyes to watch, like vision,

half-remembered, pulled from dream,  
black mares beneath their plumes dragging  
a cortege, crepe-hung, through heavy pearled  
sands, a stinging hiss of ocean swallowing  
one more name, some pestilence, women

letting down storms of wavy hair, though it's only  
a sepiaed photo I'm recalling, Grandmother  
& her sisters with their jewel names,  
Opal, Ruby, Sapphire, posed in a parlor  
for tableaux vivante—the Graces

with their billowing knee-length tresses, loose  
white gowns, but I should have thought of them  
as Fates, the trio set afloat beyond  
the farthest shores lofting pearl-handled scissors  
against whole skeins of thread. Galeforce winds

rattle locks, breathe ragged around the walls  
like black horses laboring through sand, fears  
given form, phantoms a child might magically  
appease. We did it all wrong. Emily, who says  
she's never felt looked over, never been

protected, or spared. What I hear is  
her laughter, the child's long aspirant *ahhh*  
of wonder. What I need is some talisman, an amulet,  
the old cosmology with its crystalline  
perfection of shells around the world, celestial

frictive music to navigate by. Who'd want  
to surrender? Skies pearled cold, the sea's  
lullaby crooned in the shell of the ear,  
I know, the houses scrawled by moonlight  
down the hill, salted around the bay frozen

to filligree, smooth floes of ice. Nervous  
hands twisting, Emily braids her long hair,  
rich as a mare's tail cascading, scars  
mapping each vein with the addict's tatoo:  
her immune system's failing.

How do I place them standing like figures  
in a glass case, shore's edge where sand pearls  
beneath the dome of stars—a world  
safe & comprehensible? How is a spell woven,  
like these jewels, through the hours' twilit progress?

Braids ovalling silhouettes meant for wearing  
like holy medals against bare skin. Starbursts,  
whorls inspiralled as the heart of a nebula,  
charms meant to cheat fate, to stay the journeyer  
a little while longer, who'll never pass this way again.